

Jeffrey Epstein

Bard's board voted to end Botstein's tenure as president after independent review of Epstein ties

Leon Botstein announced his retirement on the day the results of the inquiry into his connections with Epstein were released



📷 The vote to end the tenure of Leon Botstein appears to have created a rift within the college's board of trustees. Photograph: New York Daily News Archive/NY Daily News/Getty Images

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The move appears to have created a rift within the liberal arts college's board of trustees.

One newly appointed board member criticized the vote on Botstein's contract, calling it "compromised", according to the email correspondence seen by the Guardian.

Bard confirmed this week that its longtime chair - the billionaire James Chambers - and two others had resigned. The precise circumstances of their departure have not been disclosed.

One longtime professor, Bruce Chilton, noted that the recent changes to the composition of the board have created "legitimate worry" among some faculty and staff that Botstein could potentially extend his post, because decisions "which have been made, could be undone".

The Guardian has separately learned that an alum of the college has called on the [New York](#) attorney general's charities office to launch an investigation into the board of trustees. The alum alleged in a 17-page letter to the attorney general's office that the board had for years prioritized Botstein - "his reputation, his outside interests, his continued presence, his legacy" - over the interests of students, staff, faculty and the public.

A spokesperson for Bard and the board of trustees did not comment on questions about the vote or the letter that was sent to the attorney general's office. In an email, the spokesperson reiterated the college's previous statements on [Botstein's legacy](#) and the [independent review it commissioned on Botstein's ties to Epstein](#). She added: "Our focus is on the future and continuing to cement Bard's role as the nation's premier liberal arts college."

Botstein did not respond to a request for comment or questions about whether he might seek to challenge the board's vote.

Questions about Botstein's relationship with Epstein first emerged in 2019, when the [New York Times reported](#) that Epstein, a convicted sex offender, gave an "unsolicited" \$50,000 donation for Bard high schools in 2011, which was followed by a \$75,000 donation in 2012.

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The results of that inquiry were publicly announced on 1 May, and coincided with Botstein's announcement that he was retiring, effective 30 June. Botstein suggested in his statement at the time that the decision was voluntary, and that it was tied to the successful completion of an endowment campaign.

But emails seen by the Guardian suggest that the board held a vote on Botstein's contract on or around 30 April, at the same meeting in which WilmerHale presented its findings to the board.

A summary of the WilmerHale review, which was released publicly on 1 May, found that nothing Botstein did in connection to his relationship with Epstein was "illegal". It also found that the Bard president was "not fully accurate" in describing his relationship with Epstein publicly or to the Bard community, and stated that Botstein did not fully "see" a risk to Bard's reputation when he pursued Epstein as a donor for the college, or the potential risk his contacts with Epstein posed to Bard students. The law firm noted that Botstein had not disclosed fees he accepted under a consulting agreement with an Epstein entity.

Botstein previously denied being friends with Epstein, and has said he never witnessed anything inappropriate, nor had any visibility into Epstein's "monstrous crimes".

The board expressed gratitude for Botstein's service to Bard in a statement released on 1 May, but also noted that the concerns that had been raised about Botstein's interactions with Epstein were "serious and deeply felt".

The board's vote on Botstein's contract was contentious, according to emails seen by the Guardian, and appears to have roiled some members. One trustee, Asher Edelman, claimed in an email sent on 1 May to other board members that the board's decision meant "the end of our college as we know it today", and chided other board members for acting "disrespectful" to Botstein. While he wrote that he was not debating whether he agreed with "their decision", he suggested the vote was taken without sufficient financial planning, and that the members had not acted in a "sensible" or "professional" way. Edelman did not respond to a request for comment.

In response to questions about Edelman's apparent concerns, a Bard

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Pipes sent to other board members on 1 May, which was seen by the Guardian.

He wrote in one subhead of his email: “We voted to end a 51-year presidency with no plan for what comes next.”

Pipes said in the email that he did not wish to “relitigate” the vote on Botstein’s “contract”, but was critical - among other claims - of the way WilmerHale and consultants had remained “in the room” after the law firm had presented its findings, while the board was making its decision about Botstein’s future.

“Their presence during deliberations and the vote was procedurally improper and compromised the independence of the vote,” Pipes alleged. Another person familiar with the matter rejected that claim, saying it was normal for counsel to remain in the room to answer questions following such a review.

Pipes did not respond to a request for comment.

WilmerHale declined to comment.

Bard confirmed this week that Chambers, the billionaire heir who served as chair for a decade, has resigned, as well as Mark Brossman, an employment lawyer, and Mostafiz ShahMohammed, an equipment finance entrepreneur who in 2020 [donated \\$5m](#) to the college. The departures were first reported by the Daily Catch.

A Bard spokesperson said: “All trustees serve on a volunteer basis, and it’s not uncommon for members to complete their service as their terms expire, or for changing personal and professional circumstances.”

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transition in a position of genuine strength ... The entire Board remains focused, aligned, and resolved on what comes next.”

Chilton, a religion professor, noted in a statement to the Guardian that the board of trustees has been sending out “different messages” in regard to Botstein’s relationship with Epstein, from expressions of concern, to its distribution of the WilmerHale summary, to a more recent “[laudatory statement](#)” about Botstein’s tenure and his “decision to retire”.

“In the wake of these changes of tone, the resignation of the board’s chair and other members raises concern. The board bears a duty of care for students as well as fiduciary responsibility for the college ... Sudden, unexplained changes in the board’s membership as a result of factional squabbles distract the college from its chartered purpose,” he told the Guardian.

It has separately emerged that a Bard College alum has turned to New York state authorities in the hopes the board will face more scrutiny for what the alum alleged were breaches in its fiduciary duties. Among other claims in their letter to the attorney general’s charities office, the alum - who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation - pointed to a 11 May communication by the board, which stated that trustees had “never doubted that President Botstein’s motive, first and last, has always been to serve the institution”. It was a characterization, the alum wrote, that “directly contradicted by the WilmerHale findings that Botstein concealed donor relationships from the Board, accepted personal consulting fees from an Epstein entity without disclosure, and that those fees cannot be confirmed to have been donated back to Bard as he claimed”.

The New York attorney general’s office confirmed it received the letter and is reviewing it.

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